

1920s Portal x Half Life

by talietikasero

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Summary: A 1920s double AU in which Aperture and Black Mesa are rival crime organizations, headed by Caroline and Breen respectively, and a night out turns into something unexpected

1. Care to?

"Alright, I'll be honest right now. You're not the first person I had in mind to bring, but just work with me for tonight. You got that?" Caroline looked at Chell as she nodded. "Good, now if -"

A male's voice interrupted her. "Caroline! So glad you could make it!"

Caroline's eyes searched for the source. Two men were standing near them; one with white hair, the other chestnut and wore a pair of glasses. "Breen," she muttered while glaring, "I didn't expect to see you as soon as we walked through the doors."

"Well, now aren't you the bee's knees." He let out a nearly inaudible laugh. Glancing over at the girl next to Caroline, Wallace started again. "You don't strike me as the motherly type."

"What?"

"That girl right next to you."

"What about her?"

"Is she your daughter?"

Caroline's eyes slightly widened as a frown appeared. "She's not my daughter. Nobody's, really." Chell had despondently looked to the side and ambled away, while Caroline and Breen continued bickering. Her gesticulation caught the attention of the young man next to the bosses. As such, he sauntered to the bar to find material to write on.

"Hey, Gordon. What can I get for you?" The man at the bar was Barney. Barney was a bartending bootlegger by night, as he doubled as an undercover police officer at day. "Ah, so you're not getting a drink, huh? Anything you need?" Gordon mimed writing and drew an air scrap of paper. "Gotcha," Barney reached under the counter, pulling out a pen and a small square. "Here ya go." Gordon gave him a smile and started to write.

"Bartender! Need another drink here!" A slightly buzzed patron called out.

"Comin'!" Barney replied. He looked over at Gordon before leaving. "Just leave the pen there whe-. Know what, keep it. We've got lots of them here."

"BARTENDER!"

Looking over at the now impatient civilian, he had quietly said to himself "Oh boy..", then left.

Gordon finished writing his message on the paper and placed it in his pocket. He scanned the club for the girl who came with Boss Caroline. Amidst the crowd, a man in a trench coat and fedora was seated by a table, briefly caught his eyes, then looked away. _I haven't even had anything to drink yet and already I've got an uneasy feeling_ _Shaking it off, he started to look for her again. She was standing by the window, looking out to the city with a melancholic expression. He made his way over and tapped her shoulder.

Sensing a presence behind her, Chell turned around to see. Her eyes opened, then noticed that Gordon had pulled out the scrap of paper he obtained moments before. She grasped the piece and began to read what was written.

So, she's Caroline, huh? I bet she's getting a kick out of being Breen's rival. I doubt she's a saint, but he's no wonder of the world either.

There was additional writing on the back.

My name isn't relatively important, but it's Gordon. May I ask you for yours?

She looked up and began to sign.

My name is Chell.

Smiling, he signed back.

It's nice to meet you.

The band on the other side of the the facility had commenced another tune. People began to pair off and dance. Gordon looked at Chell, grinned, and extended his arm to her.

Care to dance?

She stood motionless for a while, looking back as he still held his arm out. The young woman had cradled the young man's hand with hers.

Finding the rhythm, the two had begun.

The man in the coat and fedora observed them, sipped the last of his drink, and left.

2. Your New Friend (Is Really Your Enemy)

"Those two..." the mysterious man had thought to himself. "They just happened to cooperate more efficiently than who they're associated with... Maybe I won't leave this building yet." This figure had no name as he was known as the G-Man. The G-Man had been following the actions of both Aperture and Black Mesa, taking notes as he made plans to manipulate both to worsen the rivalry. The song had stopped and everyone ceased to move. The crowd had applauded as the musicians took their bows.

"A-one! A-Two! A-one! Two! Three! Four!" The house band had begun performing again, this time to a different beat.

Barney was still concocting drinks. And as such, the now intoxicated patron was still there. "Hey, pal, listen. Most people here drink about two or three. You? You've had ten. Don't you think you've had enough?"

"Had enough? Oh yeah? Well, here's what I th-" the patron had paused to belch. His stomach ached and he placed a hand on his head. "I'll, guh.. I'll have some seltzer. Please."

"Pal, I was about to bum's rush you for being rude. Saying 'please' though? Now that's more like it." Calhoun had leaned over the counter towards the man and placed his hand lightly upon their shoulder. "Listen, you're not the absolute worst person I've had the misfortune of dealing with. Your seltzer is on the house." The patron weakly smiled as he was handed a glass.

The silent duo had begun to move again. As the tune played shifted speeds, so did they. Both simpered, seeming pleased with the current situation. Full of glee, Chell had clapped to show her excitement. A clanging noise had been emitted as she did. The sound had come from her bracelets; one blue and the other orange.

"Hmph, well you're not much for arms dealing, now are you?" Wallace had derided.

"What use would I have for a gun?" Caroline had retorted. "I've got better things to worry about than just means for defense. Cave and I..." The woman had stopped for a second. "...we had developed something a few years ago.. But the project was dropped." Clenching her left fist, Caroline quietly muttered. "Dammit, why did I have to bring his name up."

"Erm, Caroline..."

"Yes?"

Pointing one of his fingers right next to her, he had begun. "Where have those kids gone?"

She had gasped. "Oh my god.." Opposed to panicking, Caroline had kept

a calm and cool composure. "Do you feel... a strange presence nearby?"

"Good evening, madam and gentleman." Both bosses had temporarily froze and felt their hearts drop. "It seems as if Mr. Freeman and Miss..." He turned to Caroline. "What is her name?"

"Her name.. Is Chell." Caroline responded.

"Ah, yes. Miss Chell." The G-Man had removed his hat. "She and He have become acquainted tonight." Pointing to a booth, he had gently instructed. "Please, take a seat." There were three glasses of liquor; one contained light liquor, another held rum, and the third whiskey. Civilly, all three had seated themselves.

"How does that truly affect either of us? They aren't of any significance! That rag-a-muffin has no real use to me."

"Is that what she truly is? Then how does Miss Chell look like she's been living the pampered life? I'm sure that the wealth Mr. Johnson left behind is resp-" Caroline banged her fist against the table.

"Don't. You. DARE. Bring Cave up around me!" She had spoken though her teeth, resisting the urge to break the glass. "How do you know about him anyway?"

"There's no need for violence, nor is there to be a bearcat," the G-Man added, taking a drink. "And what about you? What does the young gentleman stand for?"

"Well, uh..." Breen had averted eye contact for time to think of a false answer. Searching all around for where the conversational topics were, he changed the subject. "Wh- where did they go?" Caroline had looked up from the glass of light liquor in disbelief as she, too, looked for them. "They couldn't have ventured far from here!"

The G-Man had released a soft chuckle. "You two worry about them more than you claim not to. Mr. Freeman and Miss Chell are near the bar."

"I know you don't want something tonight, but what can I get for this lady?" Unsure if he could understand sign language, Chell had written a request for a glass of water. "Not a drinker, huh? One glass of good ol' H2O coming right up." She had nodded her head as a sign of thanks, sighed, and signed.

You dance pretty well! Where did you learn? Are you self-taught or what?

Thanks and so do you. I don't remember exactly how, but I learned when I've got time. Gordon noticed the bracelets she donned. _What in the world do those do?_

Chell looked at her wrists. _Oh? These things? Here, I'll show you._ As she was about to give a demonstration, the drunken man had sprinted for the washroom. _Oh dear, do you think he's alright?_

"Probably upchucking in the John. Good thing there's a lot of stalls since this happens more often than anyone would think." Barney handed Chell her glass of water. "You sure you don't want anything?" Gordon spotted the spare glass in Barney's hands and pointed to it. "Right then. Another water comin' up."

You were going to show me what your bracelets did?

_Huh? _She noticed he was pointing to them._ Right! I almost forgot! Let's go ou-_

"And a glass of the same thing she's got for you." Barney had detected the jewelry as well. "Now don't those look like the cat's meow! Can they do something?" Chell had nodded in affirmation. She had begun to write another message on the bottom of a coaster. "'I'll show you another time'? Well, alright. I'm not holding it against you, but I'd love to see what they do. Someone's got to run this gin mill and, well, it's me. Enjoy the rest of the night and don't take any wooden nickels." Barney had moseyed down to handle the other people seated.

Alright now, let's actually go outside so I can show you what these are capable of. She had risen out of the bar stool and began to walk to a door.

Downing the last of his liquor, the G-Man had pointed them out. "Well, would you look at that?"

"What do they think they're doing?" Caroline and Wallace commented in unison.

"Owls. Can't you percieve? By the look of it, I'd say you're both balled up."

"..Shit.. You're a bull, aren't you? Would you kindly?"

"Gladly." The G-Man had consumed the last of his rum, put on his hat, and exited.

Outside, Chell was about to show how her bracelets operated. _Watch this!_ She aimed her right arm, then her left. Beams matching the colors shot out portals; one placed on a wall, and the other right under herself. Landing safely and posing as if for a photo, she turned her head and winked. _Ta-dah._ The gates had disappeared shortly after, as they were still experimental. Slightly shivering, the young woman had pointed to the entrance. _How about we go back inside? I'm getting cold._ As she was about to walk, a coat was placed on her shoulders. _What are you doing?_

It's no use if one of us isn't copacetic, even if who we're associated with aren't exactly friendly.

Gee, thanks. I may not know many people, but you're the most swell!

You're a pretty nifty gal, if I could say so. I have a quick question.

Go on.

Cash or check?

"Lovely evening, isn't it?"

3. (Her Heaven Is) Never Enough

The G-Man's voice had stopped the two, causing them to look for the source. He had stepped out of the shadows, showing himself. "I'm sure that your quote unquote affiliates wouldn't be too happy with this.. 'friendship' of yours." Pointing at Chell, he continued. "Does Mr. Johnson know that you're using his unfinished work? Or did Caroline let this slide?"

Unfinished work? But these work fine! At least.. at least I think that they do..? What aren't they telling me? Wait.. how does this person know any of this when I don't..?!

"And you," he had pointed to Gordon. "What haven't you done?"

_Oh my god.. What is he even referring to? I haven't done anything wro-.. oh no. _He looked back at her, motioning his eyes towards the door. Nodding, she had followed him back inside.

"Hmm... So much for that." The G-Man had adjusted his tie and started to walk away.

Back inside, Caroline and Breen were still downing alcohol, seated where they had been left.

"Mmmh, did he put something in these.. or is it just me..?"

"I sure hope that man didn't.. Though this doesn't have a funny taste to it." Caroline had taken her coat off and then another sip. She didn't feel any different. "It just might be you because I feel nothing."

Wallace had also taken a sip from his glass. "I wonder what he's doing now. Do you think he's getting to them?"

"Of course I did." Frustrated, he had knocked his own hat off. "But they walked away as if I didn't. Damn, I thought I had them."

"This might come as news for you, but look at that. They don't look so great now." Caroline had pointed to where Freeman and Chell were. "What did you even say to them?"

The G-Man had raised his eyebrows and responded. "Do you really want to know? It's nothing important. I would tell you, but where's the fun in that. Has she ever had even a drop of liquor before?"

"Don't change the subject."

"Do either of you think the girl really looks like she does?" Breen had interrupted. "I know for a fact that he does. He is friends with the barkeep." Downing a bit more, he had redirected their attention. "Would you look at that?"

"Listen now, the stuff I have stored here is pretty strong, so none of that for either of you. Unless your bodies can handle what you

requested." A man of average build with untidy hair had taken a seat. "Hey pal, what can I get for you?"

"N-nothing strong, p-please. I'll just request some water."

"I'll bring an extra in case. Be right back." The man had smiled hollowly as he pulled out a notepad and a pencil from his messenger bag. "And here's your wa-" Calhoun had noticed the bag's design. "-ter. Huh, did you design it yourself?"

"What?" He took a drink from the glass and laughed timidly. "Oh, uh this? Yeah, I did. I-it's from a past affiliation. Well, I can't actually say 'past', eheh.." Under his breath he muttered "I'm still there." A sharp pain had passed through his left arm. "Nnngh, not again.."

"Do you need me to get something to treat your injury? I think there's a few kits in the back."

"That would be great."

"Alright, I'll try to be right back." Barney had left to check the storage room. The injured man had picked up the pencil he took out and began to sketch the same design; a circle with a centered heart along with angel wings and a halo. Barney had returned with a medikit. "This was the very last one. Or at least the one I could find. If you would, roll up your sleeve, erm... I'm sorry, I don't think I got your name."

"Rattmann. Doug Rattmann. My name might ring a bell if you read the papers."

"I do from time to time and I think it might've come up once. The name's Barney, last name Calhoun." He took out a roll of bandages, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide solution, and a pair of scissors. As a strip of the roll was cut, it was moistened with a few drops of H₂O₂, and placed against the wound. "This might sting a bit."

"It can't be as bad as being shot." Rattmann had chuckled nervously. "You didn't have to do this for me, but I appreciate it."

"Not a problem at all. I might not be a doctor, but knowing how to do this is important." Barney cleaned the area around the flesh wound of any blood and wrapped another strip of bandage on Doug's arm. "This should tide you over for a while. So, if you don't mind me asking, who were you connected with before?"

"Aperture. I was connected with them shortly and left. Or at least I tried to.. Same with her. Who are you with?"

"Specs and I are with BM, or at least we're the 'good' part of it. This whole 'rivalry' thing seems pointless, seeing as we get along with you and the gal."

"At least you haven't been the 'fall guy' before. I can't tell you how many times I was close to being one. Good thing that Caro's not the only one who runs the place last time I checked."

"Tch, Breen isn't exactly what you'd call ducky either." Barney poured himself some hair of the dog and consumed it. "Are her

bracelets some kind of treasure?"

"What bracer-" Rattmann noticed the accessories on Chell's wrists. ".ets. Those.. they are. I thought the project was dropped all together. It looks like she went with.." His eyes briefly caught Caroline seated a distance away. "...a more secretive approach. Wait, why are you taking off your hat? Where are you going?" Chell placed her cap away, took the notepad, and began to write. She had risen up and walked away after sliding her message back.

I need some time to myself, if you three don't mind. [I don't know everything, but I'm not clueless either.]

"What happened to her now?" Caroline had donned her coat and headed towards Chell's location. "I'll be a minute."

Still seated, the G-Man and Wallace had watched as Caroline left. "I thought they had no relation, and yet there she is with maternal instinct for a girl who she said isn't her daughter."

"A person can never truly know, now can they."

"Aren't you going to go and see if there's anything you can do to cheer her up? Or at least find out what's wr-" Freeman had just shaken his head. "-ong. I think it's best if you don't now. What's her name's already on it."

"Caroline is the name you were looking for. I think I have some notes somewhere in here that are part of the project. Uh, if you'd like to know how it works." Shuffling through the various papers that were placed inside, Rattmann found what he had mentioned. "Here's one thing. It's just some sketches outlining the idea, b-basically you aim where you want them to be located, enter by stepping in one, and exiting out the other. But I never thought that it would be done. Let alone in jewelry form."

So that's what they are.

"Now I'd really like to see these in action. Could anyone go through these or do we need those things to do so?"

"Anyone. But it's still experimental, they won't stay open for long.. Calhoun, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Where did that bird go?"

"Gordon?" He turned his head to see that he was no longer there. "Gordon! You don't think that he-"

"I'm worried that he did."

"This will not end well for anybody. In case it actually doesn't, it's a few hours from morning. Go for some Joe and sinkers? My treat."

"Heh, alright. I'll take you up on that offer. Someone who wouldn't want that for breakfast is a sap."

"And how!"

4. It Takes an Ocean (Not to Break)

"Chell? Chell! Where are you? I know you can hear me." Caroline had exited the building. "Dang it, where could she hav-" Her train of thought had abruptly ceased as she heard the door open and close. "That better be you.." she had muttered to herself before turning around. "Wh-what. You're not who I'm looking for!"

I'm not here to bump you off, I'm looking for her too. You're not a pushover, that's a well-known fact. Have you seen where she went?

"If I did, do you think I'd be out here." There was a boarded up entry. "Hey, whatever your name is. Do you think you can clear that up? I'll hand you some dough if you do. Hmm.." She had looked around for a blunt instrument, spotting one jammed in the wall. "There. You can use that."

I chose the wrong night not to have mine handy, but at least here's one right in front of me. Freeman had walked up to the instrument, a crowbar, and tugged it out. Gripping it, he had taken swings at the boards. _Why am I helping Her of all people?_

"I'll stay out here and keep watch in case anybody thinks this is all suspicious. If you manage to get her out of there, I'll treat you to something. That is if anyone's even inside. But if you so much as harm her, I will find you. That being said, get a wiggle on." She turned around to get a good view of the surroundings as he wandered in. A cafe came into her line of view. "I could go for a croissant or macaron right now."

It was an old and abandoned apartment complex. No signs of inhabitants nor the girl at first glance. _Maybe she's somewhere around. It couldn't hurt to look and it's not as if anyone is i-_ The noise of a slammed door interrupted his train of thought. _n here following me._ _What's that sound._ It came from one of the rooms. _It's.. a functioning radio? Looks like this old place still gets power flowing through._ Taking precautions and light steps, Gordon had followed the sound, checking every room in sight along the way. Nothing from the first floor and nearly no luck on the next. It wasn't until he checked the second room from the stairwell that the radio had been silenced. _I hope that's you._ The noise started up again and it was slightly louder than before, coming from behind the third door. Feeling confident, he gave a single knock.

I hope that was just something else instead of what I think it is. Chell actually was inside, as she was laying down atop a brand new mattress. The knocking continued, this time twice. _Who could it be and what do they want. I'd be better off not checking, but-_ A final, triple knock was heard. _Guess I'll see who it is then._ She stood up and made her way towards the door. Reaching for the doorknob, she hesitated. _I probably shouldn't, but.. What's to lose. I don't have anything to begin with._ With a firm grip, the handle was turned and the door pulled back.

Gazes were exchanged. Nothing else. Neither of them made a move as they had earlier that night. He loosened the grip on the bar and

lowered it to his side. Taking off his pair of cheaters, Freeman had began to sign out his message.

Mind if I come in? This hallway's creeping me out. Recieving a nod, he proceeded inward. She walked back to where she laid down as he shut the door. _How did you even get in here? Or through those boards, unless you._ The sound of bracelets clanging stopped him. _Right. Whatever those rea-.._

Sit. Seated atop the platform bed, she tapped the space beside her. _Take a seat, I insist._

No. I won't. I entered this building for a reason, and that was to get you out of here.

Hah, good luck with that. I'm not leaving he- Chell had found herself suddenly shoved adjacent to the wall, crowbar against her throat.

I don't care that She told me not to harm you, I will if I need to. In the midst of this action, there was a fire in his eyes. It should be known that I kill for a living. What a horrible fate for such a pretty face.

I'm sure that we ca- nnagh. Her stomach had been clouted and she let out an audible groan. The force behind the attack had resulted in fainting.

Goddammit, not again. She'll most likely wake up before long. Gordon lessened the pressure exerted, pulled the bar back, and lay Chell's unconscious body down.

A few minutes had passed and she had regained consciousness. It feels like I've been out for a week. Scanning the room, she noticed her shoes were by the door, and necklaces and coat were hung up. _That guy better not have left h-_ The bathroom's door creaked open and the sound of footsteps were heard. _-ere._ A thick blanket was set above and his jacket was used for additional warmth.

Great, you're still alive. Are you feeling alright?

Do I look like I am? You punched me right in the stomach while pressing that thing against my throat!

My apologies, all of them. I'm a hitman, I was just following what I've been doing for as long as I can remember. I take lives by contract.

Now how did you get thrown in?

_To put it directly, it went to the highest bidder. _He took a seat adjacent to her._ In this case, it went to Breen. Not that I'm too happy about it. Been trying to get out since I got in._

It's the same with me. Well, not entirely or exactly the same. I don't remember much, but I think my parents used to be connected with the Lady. I could be wrong. Chell took a quick glance outside the window, noticing that it was currently near morning. _We should probably get going. Is She outside?_

Yeah.

Then let's not keep Her waiting any longer. I didn't answer your question, now did I.

What question? Oh, that one. Well, your answer is?

She had leaned over and pecked his cheek._ I prefer ca_sh. _Or is this better?_ Catching Freeman off guard, Chell had canoodled him._ Let's get out of here._

Much better and agreed.

Viewing the time via her watch, Caroline had grown perturbed. "What's taking him so long? How much time does one need to find somebody in a complex like this?" Tilting her head up to look at the door, she had seen the two walking out. "There you two are! I was almost beginning to worry." Briefly scanning Chell's body, she had noticed zero injury. "I have to go, but mention my name at the cafe down the street and you'll get something for free." A tiny smile had appeared. "Run along now. You must be hungry." Chell had gone the cafe's way, and Caroline had given Gordon the money she promised. "Never mention this to anybody, alright?" He had nodded his head to assure her. "Well alright, put it to good use. Or whatever." Caroline had caught a cab and was gone.

"Mmmh, these donuts are delicious. You've got good taste in pastries, Barney." Doug had taken another bite and sipped some coffee. "This joe's great as well."

"When I say I'll treat people to things, I only have the best places in mind." Calhoun's attention had been redirected at the door. "Hey, it's you two! C'mere and sit with us. We were wondering what happened to you." As the two sat down, a woman with shoulder length brown hair had come by with a coffee pot. "Morning, Colette."

"Morning, Barney." Colette had brought two more mugs and filled all four of them. "Anything else I can get for the four of you while I'm here?"

"Covering for Gina again, eh? Hmm, I think another round of sinkers would tide us over. On second thought, cancel those. Pancakes would be fine."

"We switched shifts here, actually. Two rounds of hotcakes coming up." A few lightbulbs had surged and two had blown out. "We have to get new bulbs. Again. They don't need an electrical engineer, like myself for example, to tell them that. Years at Carnegie Mellon and this is one of my jobs. It's a living though, it helps fund my projects where He won't. Haha."

Rattmann had taken another sip from his mug. "If you don't mind me asking, what projects?"

"Robotics. I can't let men take all the fun, now can I?"

"A mind like yours should be recognized. I could help you by putting your name in the papers. Uh, if you'd like."

"That's sweet of you, but-"

"ORDER UP!"

"Know what, I might take you up on that sometime. Gotta go." Colette had strode away from the table.

"Do you know much about this 'Gina' lady? Is she also into the sciences? I have a feeling that if I did a piece about them that they'd catch interest."

"I could probably ask them both if they're interested. If you were going to ask, the other jane you're asking about is named Gina Cross. Though you might want to refrain from asking too much. Mind if I use your notepad again?" Calhoun had quickly written a short message and slid the paper back.

I'm saying that because they're His right-hand team. Ask them the wrong thing or too much, you might never be heard from again. Though I could be wrong now.

"Here you four go." Colette had returned with the order; two large plates of pancakes, four smaller individual plates, fruit syrups, silverware, and four donuts in individual paper wrapping. "Here's my name in case you still wanted it; Colette Green. As for the food, enjoy. It's my break now and I'm going to shop for new lights." She had put on a coat and went out the entrance.

"Well, now that she's gone, I guess I can say what I meant." Barney had lowered his voice. "Colette and Gina are really Breen's hitwomen. Though they're not as active in that field as they were. They're mostly harmless, but you can't really be too sure. Just be careful if I manage to get them to talk to you."

"I'll keep that in mind. Ms. Green appears kind, though I can't say much as I just met her. Briefly." Doug had packed his messenger bag and placed it by his feet. "Well, let's not let these get cold." Distributing the pancakes evenly, two per person with an extra, the four consumed their breakfast.

"I'll be right back, I'm gonna take care of this." Calhoun had picked up the bill and paid. Walking back, he was, along with the others, ready to leave. The group had stood up and exited the cafe. "It's been a great time. We should do this again." Hands were shaken, hugs and goodbyes were exchanged. "I'll be looking for your stuff in the post, Rattmann. As for you two, stay safe, alright? Okay then, I've gotta go to my day job. See ya later." Calhoun had walked down the street until he was out of their sights.

Turning to face the silent duo, Doug had given them a smile and waved. "It's almost time for my job too. Surprisingly I still have it, but someone's got to fill the journalist position there. If either of you ever need anything or just want to say hi, you know where to find me. Goodbye for now." He, too, had gone away.

I guess this is a farewell?

Nah, I don't have anywhere to be. Caroline doesn't really expect me back any time soon. At least she's slightly lenient. The sight of a shopping district and a municipal park had caught her eyes. _I don't have any rubes, but I think a trip to a few stores would be great. Or

just walking in the park is fine as well._

_Both of those sound great. I could go for something new too. _He had turned his attention to the sky, observing the sun rising and shining bright._ What a beautiful day this'll be, don't you think - _She had given him a bear hug._ - so?_

I know so. Come on, the stores should be opening soon. You know how fast people go in, let's get there before they're all crowded.

Right beside you on that!

Chell and Gordon began their day in the city's shopping district. As for everyone else, Caroline and Wallace were back at their respective offices, Doug was at his job with the newspaper, Colette still shopped for new lights for the cafe, and Barney had changed into his officer uniform.

As the sidewalks had pedestrians commuting on them, the G-Man had observed from a building's window. He lowered the blinds, stepped away, and sat down at his desk. "Hmm."

5. (Just to) Feel Alive Again

Caroline was busy jotting down future plans as opposed to resting, the pen she used lead her neat handwriting to become drowsy scribbles. "Eugh, " the pen was dropped and her writing hand had been placed to rub her temples. "That night could've been better." Restless eyes darted around the room. "Some tea would go great now." Aperture's Boss had risen up from her seat and walked towards the teapot located a few rooms down. "Why did I bri-..." Train of thought disrupted, a tan woman holding a cake had stood in the way.

"Madame, are you alright? I'm sorry if I'm interrupting, I mean I could just go. Would you like a slice of this new cake I made?"

"I haven't eaten anything yet, so I don't see anything wrong with some of that for breakfast. If you would, leave some on my desk."

"Yes madame!" The woman had continued past, stopping by Caroline's office to cut a portion.

"Heh, at least I can count on someone to make treats. Thanks for that, Cake." She continued walking down the hall. "What was I thinking about? Probably nothing important. Now where is th-"

"Miss Caroline! Miss Caroline!" A young blonde had called out. The girl ran out of one of the doors to give Caroline a hug. "Hi!"

Caro had giggled softly. "Hello there." She had hugged back. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"You don't have to do anything, I just wanted to give you a hug as all!" A bright smile had appeared. "Enjoy the rest of your day!" Laughing, the blonde had cheerfully skipped away.

Taking a deep breath, Caroline exhaled with a miniature smile. "Kids.

Can't live with them, can't live without them. Huh, that's the first time she hasn't asked me about something. I'll still refer to the kid as Curiosity, just for old time's sake. I wonder where those other two of my advisers are..." Reaching the tea room, she had noticed there was recently boiled water available. "Oh good, this is perfect timing. Hmm, mint or chamomile?" As she reached for a bag, there was a note. "What's this now?"

"The tea supply is running low, therefore your mint and chamo bags are gone. I will be back later as I'm out shopping for more. There are only two left; apple and orange."_

"Ngh, I guess apple tea would be fitting." Crumpling the note up and tossing it in the wastebasket, Caroline had fixed herself a cup of apple tea. "This and a slice of cake. Not bad, but then again not good for my health either." Making her way back to her office, she had noticed an old portrait placed on the wall. "...Of all the faces I've seen in the past few hours, I didn't want to see yours..." Exhaling, the desk seat was occupied once more. "I think I have a recording somewhere in here." Shuffling around, she had taken out an audio diary. "There it is. Years ahead, that was y/our specialty."

"You are the only woman as crazy as I am, and that's putting it lightly! Hah! With you by my side, no sap dumb enough to stand up to us will get in our way! Isn't that right, Caroline?"_

"You betcha, Mr. Johnson!" The enthusiasm in her voice disappeared. "You.. _bet.. cha..." A few silent seconds had passed as the device was pushed aside. "I know you'll come back soon. I don't know exactly when, but you will."

"Caroline. If you're hearing this, it means either you let this experimental tape run for too long or you know that I have more to say near the end of these. I have one thing to say: don't let what we built fall. I may or may not come back, but I trust you. Look under this recorder, I left a note just for you."_ The tape had ended.

"Dear Caroline,_

I haven't told you much about myself, but the less someone knows, the better. Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I didn't leave on purpose. I need a vacation from this business, preferably in Europe and the rest of the States. You should know how I'm doing if you've received my letters, but you've read all of them, right? I want to know how everything is going when I come home and I'll bring some of those sweets you love. However, if I die before then, I'm leaving all of my possessions to you.

_ - Cave"_

"Well that's slightly reassuring." Caroline sipped her tea and noticed the cake slice. Using the fork next to the plate, she cut a chunk off and ate. "Wow, this is delicious. She's really outdone herself this time."

The sun was high and the streets were bustling with activity. A handful of pedestrians covered the concrete sidewalks and cars did the same with the asphalt roads. Department stores that added up to

create the shopping district had shoppers flowing in and out the entrances, logo-print bags and gift boxes of purchases in hands.

I know what would make this day better.

And that would be?

Gordon had pointed out an ice cream parlor. _If you'd like, I'll buy. Ice cream sounds like a fantastic addition for a walk, don't you think so?_

Good point there, let's go. Hopefully the line won't be that long. You really don't have to do this, you know.

After what happened last night? It's my way of making it up to you. I've never harmed a woman before, I swear. You're the first and hopefully the last.

Uh-huh, it still hurts, but not as much. Not so good with others, now are you? Chell had held his hand and smiled. _Neither am I. But that can change. You'd be the first that I get along with. Don't ruin it._ Letting go, she had put her hat on.

I'll try not to, but I'm not guaranteeing anything. The two had made their way towards the shop, his hand around her waist.

As the door of the parlor had opened, a bell dangling above had rung. There were two people dressed in white and grey inside; a young white-haired male wearing a blue beret behind the counter making sundaes and other orders, and a taller woman, oddly enough with a similar hair color and an orange beret, was cleaning tables had greeted them. "Hello there! If you see something you like, just tell short stuff there."

"How many times have I asked you not to call me that?"

"Haha, sorry. It's true though, you are tinier than I am." She had handed the two menus and an accompanying list of flavors with slips of paper and pencils. "Point out what you want with which options and he'll make it. Customized off-menu items are what he specializes in."

"Yeah, yeah. So what'cha two got?" Chell and Freeman had handed in their requests. "Single scoops with sugar cones? You got it!" The man had turned his back, reached for two cones, and scooped up a round of strawberry and chocolate. "Sprinkles? Or no?" The answer was shaken heads. "Well then, here you two are. Let's see, two cones at ten cents each, that'd be twenty." A dollar bill was handed over and the change was given back. "Enjoy the rest of your day." He watched as the two exited and turned his attention to his partner. She was carrying a newspaper and a stack of mail. "Anything new come in today?"

"Just more ads from Macy's, another offer from Hyperion's, must be that Trap fellow again, here's today's paper, and-... hmm, what's this?" She shuffled through the stack to find an envelope that struck her attention. "It's addressed right here but no return information? How did this get here?"

"Check the back, maybe there's a stamp."

"There isn't anything on this. I might as well open it."

"Hand it over, I'll do it." There was a letter and money inside. "You may not know me, but I know who you are. I'm interested in hiring you.'? I'm aware it's not national news that we're already in talks for workin' with someone, but really?"

"I wouldn't trust this. Keep the cash and toss that trash. Not too sure if She would be okay with us working or being affiliated with someone else. Who were those two? The girl looked familiar, but the guy not so much."

"I don't know, but she did now that you bring it up."

"Balloons here! Get a balloon for a great deal! And flowers too!" This voice came from one of many vendors who were present, advertising to the park visitors. "Real quality 'loons and beautiful flowers!"

That's an odd combination of things to sell. But looks like it's working; people are already lining up for that. I don't mean to alarm you, but glance over there. Not even an outfit change and still following us? Creep.

_He's talking to someone, we'd be better off pretending we didn't see. T_aking a second look, he tried to think he'd seen the face._ Huh, don't know who that is. Have you seen someone like that before?_

Not in my life, no. I like your idea and let's just go. There's some colorful flowerbeds by those statues that I'd like to see. Taking a lick of the ice cream in her hand, she had led the way to the park's art display and flower garden. Casually walking by the G-Man and whom he was conversing with, a bit of the conversation was picked up.

"So, what you're saying is that if I also-" He had spoken quickly and coughed abruptly. "Where was I? Oh, yes, I remember now. If I also consider your o-"

An accent? One of the strongest I've heard. Whatever, not like anything's going to happen with that that'll be any threat. What the hell? They're gone. I turn my attention somewhere else for a second and they've vanished.

Don't worry about them. Finishing the cone, she had bussed his cheek. _Just try and forget they were there._

_You're right, it's neither of our business. _He had finished the last of his cone and returned the action._ Are you sure that She doesn't expect you back any time soon? Just asking._

I'm sure, but I don't really care. Apparently I'm nothing special, so I don't think that She would keep really close eyes on me. It's the same with you, is it not?

Not really, I don't know. How about we just forget about everyone else and just enjoy what's going on right this moment.

Alright, maybe we can go for a picture after this. Hey, isn't that the bar man over there?

"Well, hi there! I didn't expect to see both of you here. What brings ya parkside? I'm here off-duty, but in case something terrible goes on, I don't have to be called from far away. Looks like you two are doing fine this morning, keep safe, alright? Shoot, I have to go. See ya when I see ya."

Does he always say that?

On most days. I can't tell you how many times we've saved one another's back though. He is my best friend, so I would think I know at least something.

It must be swell having someone to call that. I'm not sure if anyone would be friends with me. Apparently I'm unlikable, which I can't disagree with.

That's a lie. You are likable and you've got one. It's me, if it's okay with you.

You've got a point there, I mean nobody's almost killed me before.

Would you stop bringing that up? I've already apologized at least twice.

Relax, I'm just messing with you. Come on, we've got the rest of the day to enjoy. A breeze had swept up the freshly fallen and dead tree leaves in a rhythmic fashion as a small flock of birds flew by. The new friends had gone about the rest of their park walk amidst the occurrences.

"And, there we go! All of these lights are replaced." Colette had removed the faulty bulbs and her partner Gina had come in for her shift. "G, great timing. I was just about to leave."

"Light problem again? Tsk, it's a good thing you were here. You know exactly what to do and the quickest solution." Gina had hung up her coat and buttoned up her uniform's shirt. "I'll take over from here." Leaning in towards Colette's ear, she had begun to whisper. "If you get an assignment from the Boss, do not do it alone. Some Aperture goons are loose and it'd be better if we handle it together."

"You've got nothing to worry about and I'm not dumb enough to do that. Be sure not to burn this cafe down."

"Since when have I even come close to doing that? I'm a waitress, not an arsonist. Well, at least not in this setting. If there's anyone to worry about setting something on fire, it's the chefs. Now go on, you're needed somewhere else."

Colette had briefly hugged Gina and tussled her hair. "See ya later." Exiting, she had the door held open by incoming people. "Thank you for holding the door for me." As she continued walking, the two people had walked in and seated themselves. Gina had brought them menus and cups of coffee.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'll be your waitress today and whenever you're ready to order, let me know." She had left to tend to the other tables.

"Those people who walked by us, they looked like they have seen you before."

"I would be lying if I said that they hadn't. But if you are considering accepting my offer to you, you know where to find me."

"Actually, nobody knows how to find the likes of you. Authority figures aren't exac-

"The less known, the better. Though, I have the strongest sense that who you're under doesn't either. And who said I was the authority?"

"If you weren't, then how would you have known exactly where to locate me?"

"Keep talking like that and nobody will be able to."

"...Oh dear. Alright, you've convinced me. I'll return here with my answer in a week or so."

"I'm glad to hear that you're considering it. I'm certain you'd agree, sir."

"I'm not that old. Please refrain from calling me 'sir'."

"Alright, what would you like me to refer to you as?"

"Wheatley."

6. Like a Wall of Stars

"I take it we have a deal then." The G-Man had sipped from the mug.

"Reluctantly, but this offer of yours shouldn't be too difficult." Wheatley had done the same. "I mean, really now. How coul-

"Are you two ready yet?" Gina had returned to their table and interrupted him mid-sentence.

"Ah, yes, madam. Two pastries, as all."

"Alright then, those'll be out in a bit." As she was being handed back the menus, the sight of two more patrons walking through the door caught her attention. "Sit anywhere you'd like and -" the people who had walked in were wearing blue and orange berets and white outfits. "- I'll be right with you. Are they-? Nah, they can't be. It must just be a coincidence. Those are common colors." The one wearing the orange beret had a belt with an aperture logo as the buckle. "Oh my god. Alright, Gina, remember what Colette told you. Do not do anything without her. These two most likely aren't here to do anything aside from get some food."

"Anywhere, huh?" The man in blue had replied. Looking to the woman in orange, he pointed to a spot near the window. "How's about there, PB?"

"That's perfect, Atlas."

"Okay then," Gina had smiled and handed them the menus she had in her hands, "I'll check on you two in a bit. They seem like nice people. Maybe she's into photography or something. Focus, Cross. Don't let little things distract you. Just casually walk away, you've got more important things to think about."

"Atlas, is it just me, or does our server look a little off edge?"

"Not sure, maybe she's just got a lot on her mind. You never can know just from how someone looks. Though..."

" 'Though' what?"

"She had two necklaces with icons on them."

"So she wears necklaces. What's the big deal about that?"

Atlas looked around and lowered his voice a bit. "They were a lambda and the BM icon. I think She was trying to say something about people who work for Him."

"But, that black haired girl in our shop earlier. With that man wearing the glasses. How are they friends when we saw them if they're supposed to be enemies?"

"I have no idea. But I'd be more than aware now." Atlas had removed his hat, revealing his combed back white hair. "You might want to remove yours too, it's just courtesy."

"I can't argue with that." PB had taken off her hat as well, letting down her shoulder-length white hair. "I guess I'll have a look at this menu now." She had raised the item to a distance where the print was legible.

The G-Man had grumbled under his breath. "What are they doing here?"

"I don't know who they are, but I feel as if I do. How do you know who they are?"

"I sent them a letter asking if they'd take an offer with cash about a week ago. I wonder if they've received it."

"I work for the post. What was the address you sent it to?"

"They run an ice cream parlor. The one down the street."

"Then they've got it. At least, I remember stopping by the postboxes for the building they're in. I think. Wait.. was it the one that had no return address? That one was a little odd and I remember coming across i-.. That was you?"

"Mhm." He took another sip. "But not that many people put return addresses on mail, so they can't narrow it down to one person. I do know more than they think. And they aren't aware it's I." A plate of sweet pastries was propped onto the table. "Thank you, Miss."

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. You're welcome. The check's underneath. Thank you for coming into the Cafe today." She had unraveled the bun her hair was in and walked towards Atlas and PB's table.

"Ah, perfect timing, Miss. We're ready to order something." PB had darted her orange eyes at Atlas. "You first, short stuff."

"Alright, beanpole. If you insist." Atlas turned his attention to Gina as she readied her pen and notepad. "I'll just have a grilled cheese and a root beer. PB?"

"Tiger Eyes and a Dr. Pepper for me."

"Got it. Those'll be out shortly."

Atlas and PB had responded in unison, "Thank you." Cross had left earshot of them and headed to place in the order slip. "Is it just me, or does she seem a bit suspicious?"

"Last time I was in here, there was a different woman working. And maybe she's not what we think? Maybe she's fond of science and jewelry."

"We might just be paranoid, PB. But that doesn't mean we're entitled to jump to conclusions." Atlas had dusted off his beret and a large-set man had walked through the front door. "I think I might know that guy."

"Or at least we've seen him before. He came in to our shop yesterday. Kind fellow but with a bellowing voice."

"I'm still wondering if he was ordering all those ice cream sandwiches for himself or like he told us 'for nine people total'."

"Atlas! That's rude. Why would someone want that many of one item for themselves?" PB looked over at the giant man. "There's two others with him. I wonder why."

"One's got a Texan accent and the other man's Scottish. Huh, I could make a joke with that as the startin' line. 'A Russian, a Texan, and a Scotsman walk into a cafe.' I'm hilarious, aren't I?"

PB rolled her eyes. "I'm laughing internally. You're an idiot."

"It must be a company party or something because look at the load they're carrying. Unless they're having an eating contest. If so, my bet's on the big guy."

"Goddammit, Atlas."

"Ah, good. You're still here and hopefully the wait wasn't that long." Gina had come back and brought food. "I'm on my break now, so would you mind if I sat with the two of you? My partner isn't here."

"Not at all, we'd enjoy the company. I don't usually give out my name, but I go by PB. And this is Atlas."

"Nice to meet ya," Atlas had taken a drink of his root beer. "Whatever your name is."

"My name is Gina and same to you. What brings you to this cafe?" She had taken a swig of coffee. "Just stopping for a bite or what?"

"Mhm." PB had bit into her food. "That, and this is a good location. Being around what we sell all day makes you hunger for something else."

"Oh really? What do you sell?"

"Sweets and treats. Atlas and I run a sweets shop."

"It's actually more of an ice cream parlor, but it's in joint operation with a bakery. Also serves as a studio." Atlas bit into his grilled cheese. "I'm a photographer. PB here models for me and knows how to handle a camera herself."

"Impressive, if I had to say. I'm more of a 'behind the science of it all' type myself."

"Really?"

"Yes sir, my partner and I are in the field. She's all about robots. I, myself, am into physics. And yet here I am, workin' at a cafe to make a living." Gina had taken another drink. "Isn't much, but at least it's not the only thing I do."

"Anyone with minds like yours and your partner's are valuable. We might not be academic types, but smarts count; school or street."

"You're sweet, little lady. Colette would love you guys."

Atlas raised an eyebrow. "Colette?"

"Ah, right. I didn't name her, but Colette is my partner. If you've been here before, she's here when I'm not."

"PB, you said you've been here without me, right?"

"Colette.. Is she a little older than you and has short brown hair?"

"Yes! That's her!"

"She's very kind. I think I had a conversation with her sometime before. If I remember, she offered to take me along for a shopping day."

"We'd love to have you with us because that day is actually tonight. Atlas, would you like to come with us?"

"If I don't end up carrying everything, then alright." Taking the

last bite of his sandwich, Atlas downed the last of his beverage shortly after. "Out of all the cheese sandwiches I've eaten, that was the best. Do you by some chance have the bill?"

"It's under your plate. I had a feeling you two'd be done before my break ended."

"**"Cross! It's the afternoon rush now! We need you back here!"**

Gina had leaned back to reply. "Got it! I'll be there shortly!" She turned to face Atlas and PB. "Is that shop of yours down the way? When Colette and I go out tonight, we'll pick you up. What's it called?"

"20 Below. You can't miss it."

"**"CROSS!"**

"**I! Heard! You!** Impatient son of a... Sorry you had to hear that. I'll catch you two later. Seven-thirty sound good?"

"Yes! And goodbye!" PB stood up with the bill in her hands. "I'll get this." Taking out her wallet, she had walked over to the register.

"It's a wonder how I found her. And I still don't want her to go." Atlas had thought to himself. PB had returned with change from paying. "Ready?"

"Yeah," she had placed her hat back on her head. "Let's go. I could use a walk before we return to the shop." Atlas was chuckling. "What?"

"Ahaha, you're -"

"I'm what?"

"You're wearing my beret. And it's backwards."

PB looked down at the table to find her orange hat and her face became pink from embarrassment. "Shiiiiit." Atlas stood up, swapped their hats, and gave her a hug.

"You looked alright in it. Not as good as me, but alright. Let's get outta here."

"Great. ...uh, where did those two gentlemen who were sitting by the door go?"

"Who knows and who really cares?"

"Good point. 'Exit, through the door.'" As they left, an odd combination of four people had passed by. PB had taken a note. "Huh, four different people in a group that look to be getting along. This era's looking up."

"You got that right. At least they look friendly. Wonder where they're headed, somewhere important, I bet."

"I just realized something. I have nothing to wear for tonight! Can we stop somewhere?"

"Was just thinking the same thing. These streets look too crowded. Do you still have those rings She gave us?" Atlas had placed a blue ring on his left hand and a purple on his right.

"Why wouldn't I?" PB had done the same with a red-orange ring and a yellow ring. "Rooftop route?"

"Rooftop route. Remember to move quickly as these don't stay open for long." Atlas had portaled himself onto the top of a building, PB following immediately after. "Do you want to jump the gaps? I'm feeling adventurous. Eh, PB?" He had stopped to take in the view, which was obstructed by a blur. "PB?!"

"Well, what are you waiting for? Jump across!" Getting a running start, he had leapt. "Wasn't that great? It was fun, right?"

"Yeah, it was. I wonder what's kept in the alleys we jump over."

"Empty crates and garbage. Nothing special. Wait..."

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Metropolice. Down there. Maybe we shouldn't jump across roofs. At least in broad daylight."

"This side of the building doesn't have any people around. We should get to ground level now."

"Spring down. Our shoes can take the damage. Or maybe we could take these stairs because the door to the stairwell is right there."

"That's the better idea. We can't draw attention to ourselves. She wouldn't like that."

"At least this is our apartment building." PB had cracked the door open and went down the stairs. "Come along now. Our residence should be a couple steps down. The faster we get there, the more time we have to get ready."

"Sounds like a plan. Can we bring these rings just in case?"

"Do you really not trust Miss Gina and her friend?" PB had reached into her pocket and pulled out the apartment door's key. "Even if they do work for Black Mesa, I'm sure they aren't aware we're in talks with Madame Caroline and Aperture." As she unlocked the door, another had closed a few feet away. "Wha-"

Atlas looked over and lowered his voice. "It's the odd couple from earlier." PB elbowed him. "What? Oh, right, 'conclusions'. What are those on her wrists?"

"From the colors alone, they look like they do the same thing as our rings." PB had seen Chell make near-eye contact. As Chell waved, PB smiled and waved back. "Hello! Funny meeting you two here! Hahaha! Do you live here as well?" Placing the key that locked his apartment's

door in his jacket pocket, Gordon nodded his head. "I guess we never paid attention that you reside a few doors down."

"Well, it was nice runnin' into ya again. We've got somewhere to be in a bit, so, uh, goodbye for now!" Atlas smiled and walked through the door. "PB."

"Don't mind him. There's a lot of rudeness in that stump. Have a good day, you two." PB took her beret off as she entered and closed the door.

That was a little odd. You know, you don't have to stay in the run down place you ran away to earlier. You could stay here.

That's awfully sweet of you. But you're the only one aside from Her that knows about it.

Really now?

Mhm. But I only go there a few times in a while. I have a decent room that She gave me. It's not heaven, but it isn't a cardboard box either.

If you're ever having a bad day, you have another place to run away to.

Chell smiled. _Thank you. Can we get going now? I'd like to explore more.._

I was waiting for you to ask. Alright then, let's go.

"Hey, Atlas. Where did you put my purse? Atlas?" PB found him with his ear to the door. "What on Earth are you doing?"

"Listening."

"For what! What the hell are you listening for!? Do not open tha- ATLAS!"

"Shh. They're gone. I have an idea."

"Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it."

"Fine, I'll snoop around that guy's place myself." Atlas checked his hands for his rings. "I'll get in using these, eheheh. You coming or not?"

Rolling her eyes and sighing, PB put her rings back on. "Alright, I can't stop you. Let's make this quick." She took a step into the hallway and scanned for a clearing. "Look out the window if they're on the street."

"Ahead of ya and they are. Now go."

"You got an idea of how to get in?" Atlas took off the purple ring and slipped it under. "Oh." The blue portal was placed upon the door. "Go on. I'm right behind you."

"Whoa. This guy keeps his place tidy. Try not to take or damage

anything while looking around."

"It's safe to say that the girl's associated with Aperture, but your assumption is right. This guy's with BM. And..."

"I knew that lady was with them too." Atlas located a necklace similar to the one Gina was wearing hung on a chair. "Okay, we're done here, but when we go tonight, do not mention anything or even slightly show you know. Got it?"

"Yeah... But do you think they're suspicious of us?"

"Strong feeling. I read her face and she's paranoid. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I don't know why I follow you. I seriously don't know. I'm going to get ready now. It's nearly six forty-five and I want to be one to keep them waiting."

"You know I can't say anything against you. Alright, let's get ready." Atlas had taken one last look around and then exited. Walking back into where he and PB lived, he peered through the window. "Huh, those two from earlier must've gone far, albeit not a long distance, by now."

As the sun was close to set and the sky beginning to slowly dim, people of all ages had come out to enjoy the late afternoon. The City wasn't one for high police necessity, however there are a number of Metropolice on patrol. Most were going about their own business, while others "kept the peace", and stood guard at various buildings scattered across. There were stray cats in the alleys; as were empty crates, garbage cans that were recently emptied out, posters, and a fire escape or two.

Do you have anything of use to wear?

What? Like your bracelets? I think there is something. Glancing at his wrist, he remembered the watch he was wearing. _Yeah, I do. It's this._

Interested, Chell gave her undivided attention. _What does it do?_ Gordon had pointed out an empty crate. _Show me._

Go and stand a few steps away. I don't know if this will backfire or not. Following his instruction, she had taken precautionary paces to a safe distance. _Alright_, he rolled up his sleeve, _watch this!_ Directing his hand towards the crate, he adjusted the watch's crown. A humming noise emitted with a pale orange glow, and the target began to rumble. This is what it does. The crate was propelled from its stationary spot, pulled by the watch.

My bracelets can do something similar! Look! She had lifted up the same crate with her wrist wear. _But not from a far distance like yours can._ An officer of the Metropolice was nearby. _That guy looks like bad news. What should we do?_

Wait, what guy? Turning around, he noticed the enforcer. _Ah, damn. It's a Metro. We're not doing anything illegal, right? We should be fine._

I'll take your word for that, then. Does your watch only work on objects?

Would you like to find out?

Yes. Does it wo- She was pulled in his direction. _-rk on people?_

Apparently.

You're a charmer, aren't you?

You could say that. You're not bad yourself.

"You two! What are you doing with that debris!" Slightly startled, Chell had taken a step back as the Metrocop walked towards them.

"Whoa, whoa, pal. They're not doing anything wrong. At least I hope they aren't."

"Hmh, do you know these people?"

"In fact, I do. And I can assure you that they haven't done anything wrong. And are sure as hell not causing any commotion right now."

"Standing up for the everyday person. I admire that. But it's a waste of your time and against orders."

"To some, yeah. C'mon, talk to me for a bit, say, a few steps in the other direction." Placing one of his hands on the shoulder of the officer, Barney had managed to get a distance and buy some time.

Always able to count on a friend. Especially when he's that friend. Alright, just keep calm. Here they come again.

"Would ya let them off with a warning? It'd make you more liked."

"Just. This. Once." An empty bottle of soda was on the ground. "Pick it up."

"I'd do as he says, man."

After glaring at the officer for a few seconds, Gordon proceeded to pick up the bottle.

"Good. Put it in there." The Metro pointed his baton at a trash can. "What are you waiting for? Put the bottle in the trash can." Feeling defiant, Gordon pitched the bottle at the Metro's face. Angered, the officer raised his baton. "WHY YOU-! CO-..!"

"Hey! That's not needed! I'll take care of this. Lower. Your. Baton." It was shifted down slightly. "Lower than that." A second had passed by and the baton was at the man's side. "Good. Now, I think there's somewhere else other than here that's be of use of your time."

"I better not see any more trouble from the likes of you. Good day,

gentlemen." The officer placed the baton back onto his belt and walked away.

"Phew, that was a close one. Add that to how many times I've saved ya, huh?" Barney had turned around to face Gordon and noticed something was missing. "Hey, uh, where's what's her name?"

Wh-... She-... God dammit.

"She's gone, huh? I'll be honest here, I've had my share of bad luck with ladies. Was it at lea-..? Oh. I'll, uh, I'll stop talking now." Barney had scratched the back of his neck and stretched his arms a bit. "But why did you throw that bottle? Are you insane! One night and half of this day off your job and you do this? Don't take this the wrong way. I'm not angry, just concerned. Y'know?"

"Excuse me! Whoops, sorry! Man running here! Clear the way, please!"

"Isn't that? Uhh, Rattmann? Oh my God, it is."

"Sorry about that! Gotta ru- whoa!"

"You okay? What are you running from?"

"N-nothing. Just, uh, getting some exercise." Rattmann had coughed and nervously laughed. Looking behind, he ran his hand over his hair, and wiped off sweat from his forehead. "You don't think they caught up to me, right? For some reason, a Metro just started coming after me. I think they mistook me for someone else because there was another man dressed similar to me who started attacking people like some crazed lunatic with an infection. I was doing an article for that, but all I had to go on were medical rumors. I guess it's true now."

"Or maybe people are still suffering from the War. That was a dark time. Of course, I was lucky enough not to get dragged into that. Those who came back aren't exactly right.. But I think it's safe to say that they're in better condition than most people who didn't go."

"I'm fortunate enough to not've been brought in either..."

"My day job's over in a minute. I suggest we get walkin', thinking that the nearest Metro's gonna try to have a word with us. Drinks on me if you two want. Or, maybe we can buy some nice things for ourselves. And probably enjoy the night outside of that club we met you two in."

"Sounds like a great idea. I'm for it."

"Then follow me. I'll change out of this getup into something more suiting, and we'll go from there. You coming, Gordon?" Calhoun whistled to get his attention. "Anyone there? Who knows? Maybe she'll reappear later tonight."

I hope you're right about that. I really do.

"In the meantime, if you two would follow me, let's get this night goin'."

As the three men were headed out of the alley, Chell was on a rooftop eavesdropping on the conversation. I feel terrible for leaving so suddenly. I think I'll go back down an-... She noticed that the trio were scanning once more for a trace of her. And.. Maybe not. Looking across the rooftops, she looked back down and avoided being spotted by a split second.

"Guys, any sign of the gal?"

"Nothing. She's probably long gone by now. I mean, with those bracelets, she could be anywhere. C-Caroline might have people sent out to look for her as we're standing here." Doug shuddered at hearing himself speak Her name. "What's that thing on your shoulder?"

"Hey, isn't that her hat? I remember she was wearing that last night." Barney had taken a closer look. Upon inspection, he had confirmed that it was her headwear. "A white hat with a blue flower and an orange one. It wasn't anywhere in sight a few moments ago. That must mean she's up there somewhere." He had openly smiled as he tilted his head upward in search. "Does that help? Or if you don't want a night on the town, we could be adventurous and jump across rooftops. It's really up to what you want. I'm just here to go along with it."

My hat! I didn't even notice it falling. I have to get it back. I know I told myself that I'd wait until they're gone to go down to street level, but my hat! Sighing lightly, Chell counted down. _Three. Two. O- Shoot..!_ She avoided being seen again by a smaller timeframe.

"Did you hear that? It sounded like it came from up there. Unless there's a rodent problem, she's most likely on top of one of these residential buildings. Probably the roof of the one you live in."

"W-wa-wait. You? Live here? This is the most expensive residential building in the City! But, then again, you do fit the typical look of the 'average' person who lives here. It's not much of a surprise then. But, oh my god. Here, of all places. Lambda-Omega Tower."

"Yeah, he's the Ritzy kind of guy. May not look like it, but he's got a lot of dough. Enough small talk, let's get a move on before it gets too late." Calhoun had left the alley as Rattmann and Freeman followed close behind. "Hey man, you might want to hang on to the hat in case we run into her later."

"Hopefully she's okay. I know someone who'd be angry if anything happened. Or not. Do you guys hear that?"

"Train containing four passengers derailed. Whereabouts of persons unknown and presumed deceased. Abandoned theater has become overrun by felines."

"I just remembered." Barney reached into his right pocket. "I got paid today. We look like people who could use some new glad rags. Nordstrom's the place I go."

"Then what are we waiting for? The sun's already set, it's six-thirty, and do you mind if I leave my things in your apartment? I can't risk being recognized or mistaken for someone else again."

"That reminds me. Last time I was over, I left spare clothes in your guest room. I think they'd fit you. The sooner we get changed, the better."

"That'd be helpful. If it isn't too much trouble."

"Nah, it shouldn't be. I come over and stay who knows how many times. C'mon, the front door's this way." As Barney stepped out of the way to lead, Doug had turned to Gordon.

"Does he always do this?" The answer he received was a nod. "Ah. You two look like great friends. But how I get along with you still surprises me. I do have some bad experiences that are why I have some trust issues or why I'm not that likeable."

"You two following me or not?" Barney had unlocked the door and made his way down the entrance hall. "Take the elevator. It's faster." As the call was made, the other two had caught up. "Just in time." A panel of buttons labeled with numbers was on the right of the opening. "Let's see here. Top floor!" The button labeled "12" was pushed, prompting the doors to shut, and the car headed upward.

"The top? It must be nice up there. I bet the view from that height is great."

"It is. Twelve stories in the sky and there's nothing you can't miss just by looking out the window." Stepping out of the car, Barney had led the trio to the apartment. "If you're not afraid of heights, that is. Just remember not to look down. Or jump, if that's your thing."

Doug had rubbed his eyes as a sign of tiredness. "Those heels -" He cut himself off with a yawn. "- she wears help her survive drops from high elevations and/or speeds. I think they're shatter-resistant."

"The girl's got gear for days, huh?" Tugging at the locked handle, he reached into his right pocket and took out a key ring. "I'm glad we made a copy for me. Y'know, in case someone's looking for me." Barney unlocked the apartment's door and took a few steps inside. "Those spare clothes should be in this closet."

"Is it in this bag?" Rattmann had spotted a hanging garment bag on the other end of a few jackets and coats. He unzipped the bag and noticed the condition. "Recently laundered. Perfect. I could really use some clean clothes right about now. I'll be out in a few minutes." He walked with the bag into the bathroom and shut the door.

"Take your time. We'll be out here." Calhoun had opened a cabinet and took out a bottle of liquor. "Want a glass? The cap's still on. No? Yeah, that's probably a good idea... Going out intoxicated before doing a thing isn't so good. I'll just, uh, put this back."

_How you even know about that is a mystery. I don't recall you

learning about that stash._

"The third floor's still blocked off. When do you think they're going to fix that? It's been a few years." He stretched out his arms and sat down on a chair to relax. "Already seven. Time flies when you're not paying attention." Glancing at the bathroom's door, Barney called out. "Hey, man. Are you done yet?"

"Yeah." The door was opened and Doug strode out. "How do I look?"

"Ready to take on the night."

"Co, should I leave my hair up like I normally do or let it down for a while?"

"You look great no matter what you do with your look, Gi. You already know this."

"Aww, you're sweet. And also the best partner I could either ask for or be assigned with. Haha."

"So, I've got my revolver and do you have your pistol? You know, just in case you need it."

"Col, stop."

"I'm just sayi-"

**"Colette. Green. Stop. It."**

"Sorry. How far is this shop we're going to?"

"It's just up the block. Conceal your weapon. Don't make yourself seem unfriendly. Or, in your case, unfriendlier than you already are." Colette elbowed her in annoyance. "Joking. I was just joking. Ouch."

"Is that it?"

"Told ya. They should be inside waiting for us. I talked to them earlier and they're - right here."

PB had greeted the two women. "Hello! Perfect timing. I'll go get and tell him you two are here. In the meantime, find a seat." She had invited them in and went in the back to find Atlas.

Gina lightly tapped Colette. "See? They're harmless."

"Yeah, I guess they are." Colette had moved her head around to view the interior. "I didn't know that what's-her-name co-runs a shop like this."

"'PB'. She goes by PB. I don't know what that stands for, but I'm thinking it's her initials or something."

"Probably. I've been with her for who knows how long and she still won't tell me her real name. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Atlas and you must be this Colette I've been told about."

"Yes I am. Nifty place you run here."

"Thanks. We try to get by. Do you two own that cafe or just work for it?"

"Just work." Gina had answered. "But we do know the owner. Great man, but rarely even there. He leaves running it to the staff due to being preoccupied with other things."

"Atlas and I operate by ourselves, though we have been bombarded with offers to be sponsored or owned. There is this one businessperson who won't cease bothering us and now we've got what I think to be another."

"Well there, look at the time. It's getting dark faster than it normally does. Best we get out while we can still see and before the streets are crowded, huh?" Atlas gently elbowed PB. "You three wait outside and I'll lock up." Following his request, the women walked out the front door and waited as Atlas brought his keys and proceeded to secure the shop. "There. Lead the way, ladies."

"Gladly." Gina had started heading down the sidewalk. "Colette and I were going to go shopping down at the fashion district. Would you like to be treated or you can handle the costs yourselves?"

"I don't think I would mind being bought something. Thank you for asking." PB had modestly replied. "But I'd rather cover the expenses myself."

"As long as I'm not the one who's left carrying all the cargo, I'll be good." Atlas jokingly added. "I don't really care if it's one or a few, but more than ten and I'm out."

Colette chortled. "That might not end up being the case. Yeah, we can end up buying a lot, but we're able to carry all of it. Or just hire someone to do so, for a good buck or two."

"Heh, well I'm strong enough to carry a train load. How much dough ya talkin'?"

"What about the statement you just made a moment ago. Did I mention Gi and me buy a figurative ship load? Or did that fly over you?"

"Alright, ya got me. What store were you planning on shopping at first?"

"I was thinking Laidlaw & Newell. They've just received a whole new line of afternoon wear. Or K. Swift's. I read an ad that says there's brand new and in-stock women's fashions."

"I could use a new pair of clothes." PB had uttered. "Let's try the entire district. I'm certain all four of us would find something we all want. Come to think of it," she focused her attention to her hands. "I could use a new piece of jewelry too."

"Those rings look like they're glowing." Green commented on PB's accessories. "I would think they're dangerous, but maybe they aren't because you seem to be in good health."

"They aren't hazardous, trust me. If they were, I wouldn't be h-

"Hey, look at that!" Atlas had interrupted the conversation. "We're right in front of those stores you named!" He pointed out where they were. "Let's go inside and start browsing!"

"I finally have someone else to go into stores with that won't just wait outside!" PB tugged at Colette's arm. "Come on. I'm excited!"

"Right behind ya." She said with a smile as PB ran through the door. "Are you going in too?"

"In a bit." Cross had answered. "I want to enjoy this air before my senses are taken over by body spray." Green had gestured with a thumbs up and disappeared into the crowd. "Atlas, right? You got a smoke?"

"Yes and no. I don't do that."

"Good. I don't either, but I was just testing you." Gina spotted the rings on Atlas's hands. "You've got a pair of them too, eh? What can they do?"

"What? These?" Atlas held up his hands and realized what she was referring to. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't know. They were given to me in attempt of hire."

"Really now? Those're glowing just like your gal pal's."

"I could show you what they do another da-

"Aaaa_AAAAAAAHHHHHH!_"

"That sounds like P-Body! I hope she's alright." He dashed inside in attempt to find her.

"Colette, I sure wish that you didn't scare that poor girl." Following Atlas, Gina had sprinted through the doors and past the now panicked crowd.

"What the hell did you just do?!"

"I don't know how to explain! But at least that handled them for now!"

"'For now?!' You trapped them in a loop! With those.. Those portals! Wait a minute.. Portals? You're with Aperture!"

"You're right in some sense! But not entirely! She tried to buy us out but we said no! Oh no, quick! Use a gun or something!"

"It's a good thing I brought this then!" Gunshots rang out as Colette fired her now unconcealed revolver. _"There. It should be safe now."_ As bodies dropped dead on the floor, she extended her arm outward to PB. _"Need some help up?"_

Shaky, PB had gripped onto Colette's offer of assistance. _"Th-thank

you. How did you know right away that my rings' ability was connected? All of that aside, I'm NOT wholly or slightly affiliated. At all. I just want to clear that."_

"You know, I normally wouldn't trust anyone who posed a threat to my boss, but you and your boyfriend there? You two are alright."

"Your boss?"

"It's a long story. Gina and I. Well, we're with -"

"Are you two okay? We heard firin- oh dear." The sight of the shot bodies briefly caught Gina's attention. Turning her head back to Colette and PB, she scanned their bodies for any damage. "We were worried you were in trouble."

"P-Body! P-Body! Are you alright? Tell me you're alright!" Atlas had examined PB's entire figure. "Phew, you're okay! That's a good thing!"

"Uh, what exactly happened here? If you don't mind me asking because those dead bodies are worrying me."

"Some people dressed in off-white just opened fire at me. It was just so sudden that I panicked and defended myself the only way that I know how: by using these." She held out her hands and the rings were illuminated brighter than normal. "Wh-what?"

"Yours are doing the same thing." Gina observed the pair Atlas was wearing and readied her pistol. "Does that mean there's more trouble for us?"

"I don't mean to alarm you three, but look down the street." Colette alerted about the band of MetroCops headed into the area. "They're a time's distance away. This should give us enough of a gap to clean all this up."

"Sir behind the counter! Please assist. We weren't here to harm but we were defending ourselves against those thugs."

"**"Hmm, they're too beaten up to use as mannequins. Alright, I'll just have them taken out and thrown in the back. Maybe some of the students at the university would like them. Cleaning team! You're up!"**

"**"Yes sir!"**

"**"Don't worry about a thing. Anything you see here that you'd like is discounted as our way of saying thank you for handling those ruffians."**

"Wow, um, thank you, kind gentleman." Cross hid her weapon, making sure not even the contour of it was visible. "That's very nice of you, Mr..?"

"**"My identity isn't of any use or significance. Just be able to recognize this face for future reference."**

"Oh, okay. 'Remember your face', got that down. Again, and I cannot

say this enough, thank you." The man simply gave a firm nod and reassuring smile and turned himself in a different direction. Gina herself had observed as the scene was cleaned to the point of being spotless. "Well they work rapidly. It's like nothing happened here."

"You two, listen to me." Colette began a brief counseling. "If the law goons ask what happened, just pretend that you don't know. Worst case scenario, they take you in. Best case, you're completely looked over. Am I clear enough?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Perfect. Just act natural. I have a feeling that there's more of them where they came from. They're truly Ap, must've been who I was warned about..."

"Warned by who, exactly? Who do you work for?"

"Promise you won't hate me and Gina for this?"

"We promise."

"Black Mesa."

"I can tell you a thing or two," stated Atlas. "We're not too keen about Caroline, but not the same about Wally either. It's not the people who make up the body, it's really the head of the snake you gotta look out for."

"Are you suggesting we take both of them out."

"No, no, no. Not that at all. I can see you've got the hit person mentality. But I'm saying it's really up to you on following what your 'superiors' say."

"When you put it that way, it doesn't seem as bad."

"Colette. Gina. Whatever the two of you's names are. What happened here?"

"Oh no. They're still out here."

"Cal...? What are you three doing here? And you know what those 'things' are?"

"She calls them 'turrets'. People who will shoot anything that moves. Except themselves. They've got a hive mind."

"So that's most likely the reason that four of them assaulted us. Or, at least her."

"I'm fine." PB brushed the dust off of her pants and straightened her beret. "No need to worry more than you already are."

"Lette, did you kill those people?"

"They shot at this girl. What else was I supposed to do? Let them kill her?"

"She saved my life. You're not going to arrest her, are you?"

"I'm off-duty and not that kind of cop. Never would I bring in a friend of mine." Calhoun looked around his surroundings. "Everyone's gone back to not being concerned. Dear god, what are they doing here?"

"Should we just make a run for it?" Atlas asked Barney. "Because if so, I'd be way ahead of you."

"Not a chance, whatever your name is."

"Atlas. And she's P-Body. Or just PB."

"It's great to meet you two. But don't make a break for it. I'll handle this. My suggestion is just go about your business. If they ask you anything, just pretend like you don't know what's happened."

"Thanks for the advice. Great, those Metros are getting closer." Gina had undone her hair and took her coat off. "At least you're here and I mean that in a good wa-"

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Would any of you care to explain the disturbance we were notified about?"

"No idea what happened."

"Absolutely not a clue."

"Uhh... Nope."

"No sir."

"Sorry."

"Didn't see anything."

She didn't tell me about them. I wonder if...?

"Hmm, I see. Thank you all for your time." The MetroCop had bowed their head and exited.

"That was a close one." Barney had muttered to the group. "Maybe too close. You two have got to stop doing things like this. It's a good thing that I wasn't too far away."

"I know." Colette spoke. "But I'm telling you, we did not attack first. Tell him, PB."

"It's true. They opened fire, point blank. At myself, for some reason."

"Whatever you did, try not to do it again unless absolutely necessary. Luckily for you, the cleaning staff here are fast and you can't tell what went down right away. Still, don't do that."

"Not promising anything, but I'll try."

"Me too. Though I'm not the gun-toting type. I do have these if I

need to defend myself." PB had shown the rings on her hands again.
"Really useful."

"Where did you get those?"

"What?"

"Those rings." Rattmann had clarified what he was asking about.
"Where or how did you get them? Those are Ap's and, at least I hope, you're not associated. Are you?"

"Lady C tried to hire us and gave these as a gift." Atlas answered in PB's place. "But, no. At least, we're trying not to be."

"All I can say is that you should keep declining. I'm speaking from personal experiences. It's not that great of a job."

"I think that's really up for us to decide. But thanks for your input."

"She might be different for the two of you, compared to me. If you do accept her offer, just be careful."

"I'll remember that." PB vocalized. "I was going to suggest we browse the other stores here, but I don't want to risk being shot at again."

"At least you know that Gi and I have defense. But, what abo-"

"How about we all go back to the shop and enjoy desserts!" Atlas interrupted. "We've all had a rough night and I'm hungry!"

"The man I asked to help us and had that team cleanup said that we'd get discounts on whatever we want in-store." Whom Gina was speaking of returned to the counter. "Isn't that right?"

"**"Yes, Madame. Or, at your request, your item or items are free. Limit five, please. We have enough funds to expand in at least two more locations."**"

"You have cards?" asked Atlas. "Because maybe I'll take your offer at a later time."

"**"Most certainly. Here, I was saving them for a time like this."**
The man reached under and pulled out a records book. _**"It's an idea of mine that I'm glad I now have the chance of doing."**_
Opening it to the section full of pocket-sized cards, he gathered seven of them and handed one to each person. _**_"Don't lose them, alright? Eh, what's this? In the event that you do lose them, I could write your names down here and keep better record. What are your names?"**_"

"Colette Green."

"Gina Cross."

"I usually go by Atlas."

"I'm referred to as P-Body."

"Doug Rattmann."

"Barney Calhoun."

**"And what about that gentleman next to you?"**

"He's not a very vocal person." Barney had answered in place. "His name is 'Gordon Freeman'."

"I think I saw you earlier with a girl in white. Where is she?"

"Yeah. The girl that was with you at the cafe." Green tucked her hair behind her ears. "I was wondering if she ran off."

"We're wondering the same thing." Doug had reached into his messenger bag and pulled out Chell's hat. "All we have is of hers is this."

PB proposed an idea. "It's Valentine's Day tomorrow, isn't it? All of us should probably get her something. Gifts are always good."

"There's a really nice teddy bear over there." Cross pointed to the large stuffed bear on display. "Toy bears make excellent presents."

"That's a start. Anyone else got something?"

"You said she was wearing white, right?" Green found a womens coat. "How about this? It's black and blue."

"I found a heart shaped box of chocolates." Atlas added. "It's got a lovely ribbon on it."

"Great! You two?"

"Flowers." Calhoun and Rattmann brought over two boquets. "Red and white roses."

PB briefly smiled. Her smile disappeared immediately as she noticed someone was gone. "Where is your friend?"

"He's..." Barney began. "Over there by the jewelry department."

"I'm pretty sure she said 'gifts' and not 'not-so-subtle' signs."

"What the hell is he doing?"

"Please tell me he's just browsing for himself."

"Someone go over there and ask."

"Why are all of you looking at me?"

"Because you're his best friend, dummy."

"Dammit."

_**"I see you're looking at our finest. Is there someone you have in

mind? For a handsome man like yourself, I would not have a doubt."**_

"There you are! We were looking for you. Well, not really because they sent me over here. But still, you got yours?" The accessories on display caught Barney's attention. "I've heard about those necklaces. Expensive as all hell, but really nice."

_**"No cost."**_He had taken the two necklaces, placed them into palm-sized boxes, and tied a strip of light blue lace on one.
"Here you are, sir."

"Now that you have your contribution, let's meet up with everyone else."

PB immediately asked a question. "What'd you get?"

"An orchid. Two of them. Not the plant."

"Are we all ready now?" Atlas became slightly antsy. "Alright, do you all mind keeping everything at our shop?"

"Hmm, that'd be a good idea. But I think it'd be better if we left it all at his place." Doug suggested. "Is that okay with you?"

"Fine with me, then. Still, who'd like a mid-night frozen treat?"

"I think I speak for everyone when I say 'we all could'."

"Decided. Grab your gifts and follow me."

"Okay," Atlas was about to read off a list of everyone's requests. "So we've got the following: one banana split for two, one orange and one cherry Italian Ice, and then a coffee chocolate chip gelato. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be out with those."

Taking off her beret, PB had run her hand through her hair. "Are you sure you don't want to leave everything here? Atlas and I could just store it all in the back for now. And maybe set up a little party or something. The girl looks like she could use friends who care."

"It'd be less of a hassle." Gina had redone her bun. "As opposed to lugging it around everywhere. And yeah, your girlfriend could use a group of people like us."

Girlfriend? I guess you could put it that way.

"Well, aren't you a lucky dog?" Barney lightly elbowed Gordon. "You two are a great match. Not exactly what I'd have in mind, but it works."

"She's pretty much Caroline's priority." Doug added as he was doodling away. "Or, for lack of a better word, property. And you? You're Breen's. If they can't get along but you two can, that might end this meaningless rivalry."

"In the event that what you said fails, it'd just get worse."

"If you're all talking about what I think you are, then I agree."

Atlas had arrived with a tray full of frozen sweets. "On the house, 'kay?" He noticed PB had an envelope in her hands. "Is that continuing to creep you out?"

"I'm still wondering if that man I saw is who sent this. Erm, at least that shady looking one."

The exchange prompted Gina to join the conversation. "Wait. What man? Could you describe him?"

"He was wearing an all grey outfit. I think he had a hat as well. There was another person at the same table who had messy dirty blond hair and quite tall. They were seated at the table by the door when we were conversing earlier."

"Gi, there's someone who fits that second description who was in talks with Breen a few days ago."

What the-?

"Then that might be who it is." Gina picked up a spoon and scooped up some ice cream from the banana split. "Also, do you have any clue who this 'J.M.' is?"

"No? At least, I'm not getting anything from those initials." Colette ate a spoonful with a chunk of banana. "Whoever it is must be new. The only initials I can put a face to aside from ours are 'A.M.', 'E.V.', 'I.K.', and two cases of 'A.V.'."

"I still wonder how ours are the same but reversed." Gina took another scoop. "All terrible jokes aside, we should probably be more aware of those - 'turrets'."

"Amen to that." Colette finished the last of it. "Mmm, this is pretty good. We might stop by again sometime for another."

"That'd be kind of you. For friends, discounts on anything you like. Say, your next one is on the house like this one."

"Sweet. No pun intended."

"I'm not much of a fan of orange, but this made me change my mind. By far the best Italian Ice I've ever had."

"The same goes for me. This cherry flavor is swell!"

"You're a journalist, right? Why not write an article about us? It'd help a lot."

"I just might. Small businesses need more recognition."

"Hey, Gordon, how was your gelato? Uh huh. You're smiling." Barney turned his head to Atlas. "He thinks it's great."

That helped. Don't know how, but it did.

"Are you sure we don't have to pay for these? Can I at least leave a tip?"

"If you insist. Can't deny that."

"Should we plan on when to set up that little party?"

"If none of you can find the girl within a week, then we'll do it tomorrow."

"Noted. Well, I think I'm done for the night." Barney got out of his chair and did some stretches. "What about you all?"

"Little tired. Gonna go home for a near night's rest." Colette stretched her arms and stood up.

"Same with me." Gina yawned as she rose from her seat. "I haven't slept in about a day."

Doug scratched his head and rubbed under one of his eyes. "I'll just go where you go."

"You guys are making me sleepy."

"Tonight was an okay night. Guess we'll see you two around sometime."

"Here's to hoping she's located sometime soon."

"Are you coming or what?"

Yeah, yeah. I'm going with you.

"Good night, everyone." PB stood by the entrance as the five others walked out. She closed the door, let out a sigh and turned to face Atlas. "...I'm considering taking Caroline's employment. I don't think we can still make a living off of this shop."

"I was waiting for you to say that. We might or might not re-"

"-gret this? Believe me, I already do."

"I'm so tired I could sleep in for days. It's about time for a long sleep and a vacation."

"Maybe not that second thing, but sleep for sure. It's been about two weeks since I actually slept."

"My legs are asleep." Gina held out her arms. "Can you carry me?"

"No."

"Carry me."

"Fine." Colette picked Gina up in her arms. "It's a good thing that I like you."

"That's an understatement."

"How about this then. I, Colette, love you, Gina."

"That's better. Night, fellas."

As the two women headed home, Barney tried to strike up conversation. "They make a perfect pair. Don't you think?"

"Surely." Rattmann reached into his pockets. "...I think I've lost my keys."

"You can spend the night at my place. I think I got a guest bed. Somewhere. As for you, I know she'll show up. Just give it time. Here, take this." He handed Freeman the hat. "You might only hang on to it for a moment."

Gordon smiled weakly and waved goodbye as Barney and Doug had left. _That could've gone much better._ Taking a light breath, he headed up to his loft via elevator. Scanning the floor/button panel for the top, a notecard with a brief message was left near the '3' button.

_"We're sorry, but the third floor is still being worked on. It will be available very soon. We apologize for any inconveniences caused."
-Posted 10/07/192X-"

Tch, right. It's been that way for a while. Feels like years. To the top I go. A short nudge and the '12' encased in a miniature circle was illuminated. Moments later, he had arrived home. Prior to manually opening it himself, the door was unlocked. _What. The. Hell. This may be a sign that this needs to be replaced. Wiggling the handle on both sides, it didn't budge nor was it loose. Or maybe Barney accidentally unlocked thi-..._

Something wasn't right. Freeman knew exactly how he had left his residence, but there was something peculiar that garnered his attention.

Bracelets on the counter, coat over the sofa, and shoes by the door. Huh... The sound of rustling sheets was faintly discernible. _Please don't be where I think you are._ Proceeding to cautiously open the door to his own room, he peeked inside. _So far it looks the same._ _Couldn't hurt to look around._ Walking in with light steps and slowly scanning, a small pile of clothes were on the floor. _Wh- Oh, wait, those are mine._ Sheets had rustled again, prompting him to look up and find a sleeping body atop the four-poster's mattress.

There you are.

7. Cause I'm a Young Man Built to Fall

Should I wake her? If I do, how will she react? I probably shouldn't and just let her sleep. I-... I need a drink. Lightly stepping backward, he closed the room's door, and made his way to the alcohol cabinet. Upon opening, a note was attached to a glass bottle. _What's this?_

"G,"

Lay off of the heavy booze, okay? Or at least try to. You're better than that. I left this as a replacement. It's a recommendation from me to you. Enjoy.

_ - B" _

_Next time I see you, remind me how we're friends. 11 at night. Huh. I think this couch is soft enough to sleep on. _Removing his jacket and propping it down on the cushion next to him, his eyes caught sight of the "reward" Caroline gave the night before. _Guess I forgot to take this out. Not so much a surprise that she gave me \$400, but for finding someone she doesn't care for? Or... _

The bedroom door been opened and a small knocking had caught his attention. Glancing up from the cash in his hands, the girl had come into his sight. She leaned against the wall and weakly waved. _Hello._

_You made everyone worried! How did you even get in here? _

_I did? _Chell briefly scanned the room and stretched out her arms, yawning. _And I don't remember. _She pointed to his hands. _Where did you get that? _

_It's... It's a reward. _

_For? Why does it have the Seal of Aperture on the band? _

_It was given to me by Her. She... _

_ 'She...' what? _

_Rewarded me with this for finding you. _Aggravated, she started for the front. _Hey, where are yo- wait! _

_I am not some bounty that can be collected. _She felt one of his hands around one of her arms. _Let me- ... _Ceasing to struggle to break free, she turned to face him, seeing that he was holding up two decorative slips. _Are those-... _

_Passenger tickets that'll get us on the Borealis. It leaves in a week's time and I can catch us a ride to the station. You can forget about this place, you can forget about Caroline, everything. Think about- hnngugh. _

_That was for when you did that to me. _

_Okay, okay. I got it. _He lifted his shirt to reveal where she had punched. _That left a bruise. _

_Good. _She glanced out the window behind him, noticing the lack of distinct color outside. _It's too dark to go back "home". Can I stay? _

_Only fair. You didn't destroy my apartment, so that's a relief. _Letting go of her and placing the tickets back into his pocket, he had walked back to the couch and turned on the radio. _Take a seat, if you'd like. _She sat adjacent and lay down. _Um... _

She lifted her head up. _Hm? _

_N-nothing. Are you comfortable like that? _She rested her head back down and paid him no attention. _I'll take that as a 'yes'. _The soft

music had lulled Chell into a peaceful her up in his arms, he carried her back into his room. Noting that she was fast asleep, he had taken additional precautions to avoid making the slightest sound. Laying her head upon the pillows and pulling the blanket over her, he wrote a message and left her hat on the nightstand. _We all left a surprise for you at that ice cream shop we went to. Sleep well and hopefully this'll be the first thing you see when you wake up._

Gordon exited his apartment, walked down the hall to the roof access staircase, and proceeded up. As soon as he stepped outside, the cold wind brushed against his body, and the cool temperature blended nicely with the dark blue-black sky._ This is one of the tallest structures in the city, I can see everything from here. _He perched himself upon the top of the access stairs casing, increasing the view. _Stars are shining, albeit faintly, and the glow from the lights of the city are a perfect companion. I don't have to run for my life from the Metros again. It's a beautiful night. _He sensed a bit of emptiness inside._ Just wish I had somebody to share it with.

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* * *

><p>"This stupid key..! Work dammit!" Barney struggled trying to win the fight against the lock, wriggling the key around, eventually managing to open it. "There we go, you dumb thing." As he put his keys back into his pocket, he muttered under his breath "I have to replace you, again." Clearing his throat, he stepped inside. "I don't have much here, but the guest room should last you until morning. Or, at least until you're back on your feet. Stay as long as you'd like, I could use a roommate."

"Thanks." Doug removed his scuffed black shoes before entering. "Damn, I just waxed these and the shine is already gone." Distracted, he set his footwear down by the door. "Were you serious about the roommate thing?"

"Yeah." Barney was by his glass cabinet, taking out two averaged sized cups. "That guest / spare room is available, I've got no takers, and you look like you need a place."

"I have two spare keys, but they're in my work desk. I'm not sure when I'll be able to even go back there. Given I haven't had all my possessions thrown out without me knowing."

"Hey, don't worry yourself too much about it. You've just got to think positively, 'kay?" Calhoun brought out two cans of soda, poured the contents into the cups, and offered Rattmann one. "Thirsty?"

"Am I ever." There was a faint pep in his voice as he took one of them and drank out of it. "So, if you don't mind me asking, how long have you been disguising yourself?"

"Disguising? Ah, you mean my 'day job'. I lost track, but I'm guessing a while. Now if you're wondering about my 'night job', I do have a partner for that. She and her parents just happen to be out of town and most likely won't be back for a while, so you didn't get the chance to meet her."

"Do you mind me asking the reason?"

"Business. And by business, I mean travelling for gigs here and there. Her parents are pretty much celebrities in their own respects. You're going to ask, right? I'll save you the time. They're the Vances."

"You know the big names, don't you? If I ever do meet them, I'll try to hold back the questions."

"I don't think they'd mind, but hey, do whatever. I still need to arrange that interview with Gina and Co-co for you."

"Don't worry too much about it. I don't think any of us are mentally stable to do anything. For a while."

"I've got a hunch you're right about that." Calhoun sensed his eyes droop, nearly dozing off from the hours on end he'd been awake. "Haven't caught any shut eye for more than a day. It's already midnight." The two walked over to the doors, turned their heads to face each other, and easily saw the sleepless looks on the other's face. "I'm off to sleep, so see ya in the morning."

"Oh wow, I'm in the same position." Rattmann turned the handle and the guest doorway opened. "Though I've been awake longer or lack a decent amount of sleep more than you. Good night and thanks again for letting me stay."

* * *

><p>"Co-co! Wake up, Co-co!"<p>

"Nnnn..." Colette mumbled, face down in the pillows. She picked her head up to look at the clock. "It's eight in the morning, you know I don't wake up until ten on days off."

Gina held a mug towards her. "Coffee?"

"Eh, sure." Colette extended her right arm, gripped the handle, and set the mug on the nightstand. "What do you want?"

"We have somebody new!"

Combating the urge to fall back asleep, Colette brought herself to be seated upward. She rubbed her eyes and yawned as she questioned. "How long have you been awake? And, oh really? Who are they?"

"Since seven and her name is Judith."

"My god, you are insane." She reached over for her drink and sipped. "Does her last name begin with 'M'?"

"'Mossman', yes. I don't think she's much of a threat, but she's now Breen's assistant."

"We haven't even met the woman and yet you're already set on trusting her with your life."

"I don't trust her yet. I'm just saying I'm, uh, happy we have a new person with us."

"...Right. Sorry. I still have last night on my mind. Never expected to do something like that. I just don't get how we're expected to have a strong dislike for Aperture. That girl with Freeman doesn't look like she'd double-cross anybody. Not us, not Atlas and PB, What's-Her-Face, and I hope not him. For his sake, poor guy's probably not so well."

"You're right. I think they're getting along. Not so sure that Caroline and Breen would approve, let alone allow them. Do you think he found her?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Did you at least make breakfast?"

"Yeah. I made eggs and toasted some bagels."

"I'm going to get dressed and I'll meet you downstairs." Green tousled her own hair, moving her blanket in order to stand. "Go on, I'll be down in a few." Respecting her girlfriend's privacy, Cross left immediately. "Hmm, I guess only brushing my hair is good for now. Unless we need to leave for something." Cup in her hands, she exited and headed for the living area. The scent of Gina's breakfast made its way to Colette. "It smells delicious!"

"Thanks! I tried some stuff that Magnusson showed me." With a plate in her left hand, Gina arranged some food into a presentable manner; cooked eggs cut into heart shapes, fresh-cut fruit, a toasted bagel sliced in half, and an accompanying scoop of cream cheese.

"So now there's an identity to this 'J.M.', but who's the other guy?"

"I'm still wondering about that. If we're called in, we might just meet her."

"What do you mean 'if'? He still has yet to give us our checks."

"Ah, right. When are you planning to go?"

"Tomorrow. Maybe." Colette evenly spread cream cheese on one bagel half and nibbled. "Do you think more of those 'things' are out there?"

"Honestly, I wouldn't doubt it. I have to say, though, your markswoman skills haven't rusted at all." She noticed Colette blush and avoid eye contact, smiling at how she made a hitwoman she'd known for most of her life embarrassed. "Forgot you're not one for compliments that often."

* * *

><p>"New glass? It doesn't look too different from the others, but the 'new window' scent might be here for a while. I still wonder how -â€| Isn't this a pleasant surprise? Hello there, Caroline."

"Greg." Caroline scanned the surroundings and the newly replaced glass window above the shards of the previous threw her off. "Oh my god, what happened here?"

He shrugged his shoulders and responded nonchalantly. _"There was an incident last night. Nothing too serious."_

"I'll, uh..." She noticed the soapy smell mixed in with traces of blood and bullets. "I'll take your word for that. Is the gift I reserved still here?"

The man placed a bit of enthusiasm into his voice and a smile appeared upon his face. _"Yes, the one for Mr. Johnson is. It's in the vault..."_

"No, not that one. The _other_ gift."

"That's one. Hmm. I'll be right back." _Greg opened the door behind him that lead towards the gift storage.

"Pfft." Caroline muttered under her breath. "That's reassuring."

"I don't think the other staff would mind, but come back with me."

Following his lead into the area, she nearly shut the door. "You have something to tell or show me?"

"Why else would I bring you back here? You do want to know what happened, right?"

"Well, yes."

"First, answer me this. Does Cave know that the Girl has your project?"

"What on Earth do you mean the project? The bracelets? I haven't told him yet but he hasn't come back from his travels either."

"Hmm, alright. My next question is does he even know about her."

"...No. Not even one bit. Mind if I ask why you're bringing her up."

"She wasn't here last night, but I assume the band of misfits that was here were looking for her. However, prior to the incident, I did see her with one of them."

"How much earlier?" Caroline tilted her head to the right and cocked an eyebrow up as she wanted an answer.

"Daylight. He was wearing, oddly enough, the colors of Black Mesa."

Caroline crossed her arms and bowed her head down. "And to think I paid the guy just to bring her back safely?"

Greg's eyes narrowed at Caroline's statement. _"You did what?"_

"Long story short, I brought her with me to a nightclub, we ran into Breen and what's his name."

"Gordon."

"Yeah, him. I think? It doesn't really matter to me. She ran off, I asked him to go after her, he brought her back, and I paid him."

_"You're probably unaware, but he's most likely developed feelings for her." _Greg went into the inner vault to search for Caroline's second gift, leaving the door ajar.

"You have got to be joking." Caroline slightly raised her voice to be heard.

_"Not at all." _Greg called back. The sound of boxes shuffling and wrapping paper rustling ceased._ "â€|It's gone."_

"Gone!? How is it gone?! It's in a white box and has my insignia on it!"

"False alarm!"

"You'd better hope it was a false alarm!"

"I've just found it."

"Do not give me a heart attack! Jesus, Greg. I know you're one of Cave's most trusted men, but please, don't worry me like that again."

"I almost forgot something. Received a message from Cave himself, he asked me to reserve something special. Said it's for a special event. Do you have any idea what he's talking about?"

"I do. An upcoming performance of mine."

"What type of performance?"

"Opera. It's a hidden talent that I prefer to keep under a pseudonym."

"That was another note. Your lovely singing voice. Our resident tailor is on the second floor and she's waiting for you."

"Cave didn't give you my measurements?"

"He did. Though when making clothing, Mel prefers to have whomever it's being made for present. That way, she feels accomplished and knows that her customer is satisfied with her work. Her assistant, Virgil, should be here in a minute."

"Hello?" A midsize male with neatly kept light brown hair walked in on Greg and Caroline's conversation. "You must be Caroline. Come along, she is eager to meet you."

"Virgil, I presume."

"Yes, ma'am. Miss Mel has various fine materials awaiting your choosing."

"I bet she does. Go on ahead and I'll follow."

"Sure thing!" Virgil led Caroline to the elevator, due to the stairs being closed off temporarily. "Sorry for not informing you of the stairs. Somebody spilled liquids and It has yet to be cleaned up."

"It's not a problem. I didn't feel like walking this morning." With the door sliding open, the elevator ceased to move, indicating the two were on the second floor. "Do you hear a telephone ringing?"

"It's coming from where Mel is. It's not too much of a walk from here. Follow me." He power-walked down the hall in order to answer the ringing as soon as possible. "Hello? Ah, it's you again! Yes, she's here. Uh huh. Caroline is here." Virgil glanced over and gestured for her to take the phone. "I'm handing it over."

Slightly confused and hesitant, Caroline held out one hand and was given the device. "Caroline here. May I ask who's asking for me?"

An all too familiar voice happily spoke. _"Hey, how are you doing? I should be back next week."_

The woman immediately gained a joyful mien. She knew exactly who had called. "Cave!"

* * *

><p>Hnnnh, what time is it? Nine? It's really bright outside. The sunlight illuminated the bedroom, prompting her to squint her eyes in attempt to filter the light out._ Did he just leave me here or is he still inside the building? _She arose from the bed she was laying in, changed her clothes into one of the spare outfits she brought in her duffle bag, and walked towards the door. Reaching to open it, the door opened from the other side before she touched the handle._ Hey, you._

_Good morning. You're up and you've changed into something else. Are you hungry? _Gordon kissed Chell on her left cheek._ I spent some time making breakfast._

Chell had kissed him back and saw herself to the food he prepared. _This looks amazing! Even better than Caroline's professional chef can do._

I know somebody that's a pro, though they're not too happy with me because I ruined something of theirs. Once. Still hasn't moved on from that.

Can I use your shower? I feel gross.

Not a problem, just remember that the right is for cold water and the left is hot. There was a slight mishap with the pipes and whoever repaired them swapped the temperatures.

_Noted. _She ran her fingers through her messy hair and rubbed the back of her neck._ I'll be back in a few. Wait for me, yeah?_

_No rush. Take your time. There's a spare towel already in the

bathroom. And " _The door shut. -_ Alright, never mind then. What's got into you, man? Who knows though, she might be the best match for you and you might never see her again if this goes wrong! _Water started to run as the shower turning on emitted a quiet hum. Gordon removed his glasses, rubbing his eyes in attempt to clear his mind. _Okay, okay, you're worrying yourself too much. Just make some toast and drink something._

Minutes had passed and the water ceased to flow. Moving out of the shower, Chell dried herself with the towel hung on the rail. A mirror was mounted upon the wall and she examined her physique. _The bruises are still on my body. Perfect. At least the stink of sweat and what I presume blood is gone for now. Maybe he'll look past them? I wonder if She's thinking about where I am. Most likely not. Damn, I forgot my change clothes. _She finished drying her body, wrapped the towel around herself, and found her clothes on the counter. _No, wait, here they are. _Patting herself with a smaller towel, she dabbed the excess water off. Looking at her spare clothes, she picked up the orange chemise._ Undergarments, check. Shirt, check. I haven't worn this in a while, but at least it's still clean. And black shorts._

_Huh, nothing interesting in this. _Gordon flipped through numerous magazine pages, trying to find something worth reading. However, he only found the news stories from yesterday, clothing advertisements, and promotions for a series of upcoming concerts. Amidst the ads, one for the Borealis was printed double-page style. _Just a few more days. Then we're off for wherever the ship takes us._

I didn't keep you waiting too long, did I?

Maybe a few minutes. So, not that long. I don't really know, I didn't keep track. Help yourself to whatever's here. Tea or coffee?

_Tea, please. She introduced me to both, but I'm not too big on coffee. One of Her assistants gets all kinds. What do you have here? _She was handed a palm sized chest full of flavored bags. Browsing through the various options, she picked out jasmine rose._ Hmm, this one._

_I had no idea that I still have one of that flavor. Good choice. _The kettle whistled and a stream of steam escaped the spout. _Oh, look, the water's done. Any sized glass or it doesn't really matter?_

She shrugged. _Surprise me._

_Hmm, alright. _He poured hot water into a midsized cup and set the bag._ Here._

_Thank you. _She spread some jam on an English muffin with a silver knife and took a bite._ Mmm, this is delectable._

Bought them this week, so I hope it is. You don't have to sit at the café table. I don't. I usually prefer to sit on the windowsill because of the view. But that's just me.

Perks of the top floor, right?

_Right. Also extra cash and some creativity. _He seated himself on the cushion adjacent the window; two drawers nestled beneath. _Come here and see for yourself._

She positioned herself in front of him, leaning back to rest upon his chest, and peered outward. Her eyes widened as a clear smile formed. _It's lovely. _Chell saw the newspaper Gordon had in his hands. _Is that today's?_

_What? This? Yeah, would you like to see it? _She eagerly nodded and he handed it to her. The headline printed in large letters prompted a head tilt and an eyebrow raise. _What the-â€| This can't be rightâ€|_

She unfolded and straightened out the paper to view the front story. _This is about an incident that's dated last night. But it says nothing happened._

_I was out with a few people, we were minding our own business, and thenâ€| _He formed a gun with his hand and pretended to fire. _There were a few bullets. No one got hurt, but it's still on my mind. It's a good thing you weren't there because they were Aperture-affiliated._

_I know what you're referring to. Were they dressed in white, black, and red? _He bobbed in affirmation as she sighed._ She calls them the Turrets. _Chell folded the paper back, set it down on her lap, and both of them a swig of their beverages.

You know what'd make this situation better?

Huh? What?

_I'm thinkingâ€| _He nuzzled the side of her neck and wrapped his arms around to cuddle_. Maybe this._

In response to his action, she laughed.

End
file.